A NEW TRANSLATION

BHAGAVAD GITA

The BELOVED LORD'S *Secret Love Song*

GRAHAM M. SCHWEIG



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THE *BHAGAVAD GITA* IS OFTEN REGARDED as the Bible of India. With a gripping story and deeply compelling message, it is unquestionably one of the most popular sacred texts of Asia and, along with the Bible and the Qur'an, one of the most important holy scriptures in the world.

Part of an ancient Hindu epic poem, the dialogue of the Bhagavad Gita takes place on a battlefield, where a war for the possession of a North Indian kingdom is about to ensue between two noble families related by blood. The epic's hero, young Prince Arjuna, is torn between his duty as a warrior and his revulsion at the thought of his brothers and cousins killing each other over control of the realm. Frozen by this ethical dilemma, he debates the big questions of life and death with the supreme Hindu deity Krishna, cleverly disguised as his charioteer. By the end of the story, Eastern beliefs about mortality and reincarnation, the vision and practice of yoga, the Indian social order and its responsibilities, family loyalty, spiritual knowledge, and the loftiest pursuits of the human heart are explored in depth. Explaining the very purpose of life and existence, this classic has stood the test of twenty-three centuries. It is presented here in a thoroughly accurate, illuminating, and beautiful translation that is sure to become the standard for our day.

Bhagavad Gītā

The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song

Graham M. Schweig

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Introduction

The Meaning of the Bhagavad Gītā

The Bhagavad Gītā comes to us from sacred India. Its verses of ancient wisdom on the mysteries of human existence speak to us today as if they had just been spoken. The Bhagavad Gītā is one of the most loved works among the collections of scriptural texts found within the Hindu traditions. It also stands out among the holy books of the major world religions, for its flowing Sanskrit verses present a uniquely vivid portrait of the intimacy between humanity and divinity. Indeed, this divine intimacy is revealed in the form of a dialogue that takes the soul on an inward journey culminating in the ultimate state of *yoga*, in which souls unite with the heart of God.

The Bhagavad Gītā, often called simply "the Gītā,"[1] is essentially a book on *yoga*.[2] This profound teaching is the book on *yoga* par excellence because it presents *yoga* in the most comprehensive sense of the term and in all its depth. As discussed in "Textual Illuminations," *yoga* covers a broad range of practices and visions, significantly more than what we encounter in the West, or for that matter more than what a reading of famous treatises on *yoga*, such as the Yoga Sūtra of Patanjali, may yield. In the Gītā, the concept of the sacred connection of humanity with divinity is gradually introduced and developed, then fully disclosed as the "supreme secret of *yoga*."[3]

Bhagavad Gītā may be translated as "the song of the Beloved Lord," which conveys a divine yearning. The word *Bhagavad*[4] means "the Beloved Lord," referring to Krishna, whose voice is prominent

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1 Throughout this discussion, the title Bhagavad Gītā is shortened to "the Gītā." In footnotes and verse references the title is abbreviated as BG. When specific verses are referenced, the chapter number appears first, followed by the verse number.

2 The word *yoga* is found 78 times in the BG, appearing in every chapter except three (chapters 1, 15, and 17). The word *yoga* and related words, such as *yogi* (found 28 times) and *yukta* (found 49 times), appear 155 times. This means that in over 20 percent of the Gītā's verses the word *yoga* or its related forms appear.

3 This phrase is found in the words *guhyaṁ paraṁ yogam* in BG 18.75. The "supreme secret" is discussed at length in the "Textual Illuminations."

4 The *g* in *Bhagavad* is pronounced as in *go*; the *a* is pronounced as in *about*. See "Pronunciation of Sanskrit." The word *Bhagavad*, translated as "the Beloved Lord," is a modified form of *bhagavat*, according to the Sanskrit rules of euphonic combination, *sandhi*. The word often appears in other works as *bhagavān*, the word's inflected form in the nominative case.

throughout the work. In the Bhagavad Gītā, Krishna, perhaps the most loved of all manifestations of divinity in India, is identified as the ultimate and supreme Lord, from whom all other divine manifestations emanate. *Gītā*[5] means "song," in this case one coming from Krishna or God. Clearly the text is a philosophical poem and not a song in the literal sense. At a deeper level, however, it is a song issuing forth from the heart of God. It is the secret call of the divinity for all souls to love him, to take the journey to him, to be blissfully united with him.

The Bhagavad Gītā in Context

Although India is the birthplace of a variety of religious traditions, including Buddhism, Jainism, and Sikhism, it is Hinduism that is the dominant religion in India today. Hinduism is composed of several primary and numerous less familiar traditions, all theologically distinctive, yet each acknowledging the revelational authority of a common ancient scriptural source. Possibly the oldest sacred text in the world, dating as far back as 2500 to 1500 BCE, the collection of Sanskrit hymns known as the Vedas are foundational for the myriad traditions that come under the umbrella of Hinduism. These traditions make up the largest constituency of religious practitioners in South Asia. Among these, the traditions that focus upon the supreme divinity of Krishna or his cosmic manifestation of Vishnu are known as Vaishnava, and they constitute the dominant form of religion. The Bhagavad Gītā comes to us from this Vaishnava tradition, which is present throughout India and, in the second half of the twentieth century, around the globe.[6]

This beloved book of India is often called the "bible of Hinduism" in the West. As the Bible is for Christians and the Qur'an

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5 Pronounced "geet-ah."

6 A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda (1896–1977), as an elderly monk, along with his disciples, established the orthodox practice of the Chaitanya school of Vaishnavism (as the modern Krishna movement) in many major cities around the world, beginning with the United States in 1965. His translation and traditional commentary on the Gītā, *Bhagavad-gītā As It Is* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1972; Los Angeles: Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, 1983, 1989), is by far the most widely read and distributed in the world.

for Muslims, so it could be said that the Bhagavad Gītā is for Hindus, for it is the single most influential philosophical sacred text coming from South Asia. Though it is, since the seventh century, the most widely read and commented on holy text in all of India, it comes from a tradition that reveres many sacred texts, unlike Western religious traditions, which focus on one sacred book of revelation. Moreover, though the Bhagavad Gītā is usually read alone, it is a small section of a substantially larger text, perhaps the largest epic poem in the world, the Mahābhārata. The philosophical verses of the Gītā stand gracefully as an autonomous text with a beginning, middle, and end, despite their original placement within the continuum of this greater epic poem. The Mahābhārata, containing approximately 100,000 verses, is thought by Western scholars to have appeared in its final form sometime between 500 BCE and 200 CE, though traditional dating of events in the text places them in the third millennium BCE. The eighteen chapters of the Gītā appear as chapters 23 through 40 in the Book of Bhīshma, the sixth of the Mahābhārata's eighteen books.

Historically, we first come to know of the divinity of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gītā text. Although his identity as "the divine lover" is not revealed in the Gītā, Krishna is traditionally appreciated as the divinity who sends out a love call to all souls. His call is intended for those who relate to him in loving intimacy, not for those who regard him with reverential awe, worshipping primarily his attributes of cosmic power and majesty. As the supreme divinity, Krishna plays multiple roles, adopts a variety of personae, and displays numerous grand and cosmic manifestations, yet he is also delightfully playful and personal. The various roles that Krishna assumes in his more intimate acts, particularly as a youthful cowherd, are considered the most exquisite, revealing endearing and beautiful visions of the supreme.

Most enchanting and charming, Krishna is loved and worshipped by Hindus in a variety of forms: as a sweet but mischievous child, as the closest friend, or even as the ultimate lover. In these intimate relationships with the divinity, Krishna, famous for his divine love call, sends forth his call by producing captivating music on his flute. He is best known for alluring the lovely cowherd maidens of the paradisal village of Vraja out of

their homes, one serene autumn evening. Upon hearing his irresistibly sweet flute music, the maidens abruptly abandon their families and household duties to join him in the moonlit forest. On this sanctified night, the maidens and Krishna enact the famous Rāsa Līlā, which I have broadly translated as the "dance of divine love."[7]

In the Bhagavad Gītā, Krishna's call to love, the expression of his divine longing, is a more hidden feature of the text, though it carries the Gītā's most powerful message: the heart of God passionately desires to connect with the hearts of humans. Here, Krishna's love call is directed to Arjuna, his dearest friend, who already knows Krishna's love but finds himself in a devastating worldly crisis that distracts him from the heart of God. In the dialogue that ensues between Krishna and Arjuna, Krishna gently and compassionately brings Arjuna's heart back to his divine heart, even in the midst of the most trying of circumstances—war. As might be expected, the outer conflict that distracts Arjuna from his relationship with Krishna is accompanied by intense inner conflict. This personal crisis, however, serves to reunite Arjuna with the divinity, enabling him to return to the overwhelming challenges of the outer world with renewed strength and resolve.

Outer and Inner Conflict

When turning to the first verse, the reader steps into a greater story that is already taking place. The opening words are spoken by a king, which we discover from his epithetical name, Dhritarāshtra, meaning "powerful ruler." From the background story that surrounds the Gītā event we learn that this king, significantly, was born blind. The sons of the king are prepared to lead his army into battle against the sons of his deceased younger brother,

7 This celebrated passage is found in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, tenth book, chapters 29–33. See my *Dance of Divine Love: India's Classic Sacred Love Story: The Rāsa Līlā of Krishna* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005) for a translation and comprehensive treatment of this sacred text, with an introduction.

Pāndu, who inherited the throne from their renowned ancestor, the great King Bharata, due to the older son's blindness. Unfortunately, when the noble and righteous Pāndu passed away, his five sons (the Pāndavas) were too young to assume the throne. Their envious uncle, in his blindness, thus took over the kingdom and ruled for many years, with devastating results. The Pāndavas, led by Pāndu's grown son, the general and archer Arjuna—the mightiest warrior of his time—fervently desire to take charge of the kingdom to restore peace. Their uncle and his sons, however, led by the eldest son, Duryodhana, have refused to surrender the throne. Consequently, a battle is inevitable.

This great classic of some seven hundred Sanskrit verses opens with the tension of imminent battle, as each army, lined up like pieces on a chessboard, looks over the other, setting the stage for the dialogue of the Bhagavad Gītā. The first half of the first chapter can be understood as the narration of Arjuna's outer conflict (BG I.1–I.27) and the second half as the expression of his inner conflict (BG I.28–I.47). The full impact of the looming confrontation weighs on Arjuna as he prepares to lead his men against an enemy army composed of many of his teachers, friends, and even relatives. Anticipating that he will have to fight and slay those whom he loves and reveres, Arjuna is overcome by grief and hurled into debilitating despair:

> My limbs are sinking down
> and my mouth has
> become very dry.
> Also, my body trembles
> and the hairs of
> my limbs stand on end.
>
> My bow, Gāndīva,
> falls from my hand
> and even my skin is burning.
> I also am unable
> to stand steadily and
> my mind seems to be reeling.
>
> (BG I.29–I.30)

While experiencing such agonizing symptoms of dread, Arjuna is unable to respond in accordance with his nature as a warrior to the outer conflict he faces.

The Gītā begins, then, by introducing a seemingly irresolvable ethical challenge: should the virtuous Arjuna protect the innocent by fighting an enemy army composed of loved ones and gurus? The ethical codes of ancient India command him to carry out his duty as the leading warrior of his time, to protect the innocent from ruthless forces; yet these same codes forbid a warrior to kill family, friends, and especially a teacher or beloved guru. Indeed, the Gītā informs us that there always will be ethical conflict in the outer world. Consequently, the text does not attempt to resolve the dilemma that befalls Arjuna, at least not directly. Instead it points to something deeper.

This work of Indian spirituality not only raises the question of the appropriate action for Arjuna to adopt, it also defines the existential challenge facing every human being. As struggling souls we ultimately attempt to transform our precarious painful world into a meaningful one. In the first half of the opening verse, spoken by the blind king Dhritarāshtra, the Gītā presents such an existential tension:

> On the field of dharma,
> on the field of Kuru,
> assembled together
> desiring to fight,
> Were my armies
> and indeed those
> of the sons of Pāndu—
> how did they act, O Sanjaya?
>
> (BG 1.1)

The first two lines, *dharma-kshetre,* "on the field of dharma" and *kuru-kshetre,* "on the field of Kuru," set the stage for this tension. The field of Kuru, the holy place known as Kurukshetra, is presented here as a place of "dharma." Named after the pious King Kuru, the common ancestor of Dhritarāshtra and Pāndu, Kurukshetra is, ironically, the site where the civil war between the sons

of these two brothers, along with their respective armies, is about to take place. The reader learns that in the world of human interaction, we have an opportunity to live a life of dharma—a godly life promoting true happiness in relation to our worldly responsibilities and ultimate spiritual goals—or an ungodly life, in which forces destructive to dharma constantly prevail. The armies of the Pāndavas, the sons of Pāndu, represent the life of dharma; Dhritarāshtra's armies, the Kauravas, are destroyers of dharma.

Like Arjuna, we humans often are caught between Pāndava– and Kaurava–like forces, vacillating between thoughts and activities that elevate the spirit, helping us to rise above the destructive forces surrounding us, and those that degrade the spirit and further embroil us in the perils of worldly existence. The Gītā speaks deeply to each of us, for at some point, doesn't every soul, like Arjuna, face a unique battlefield in the outer world as well as within? Throughout, Krishna proffers not only *that* we must act, but also *how* we must act to fight our individual battles. The axial core of the Gītā is this perpetual existential tension that we encounter—but not without purpose, the Gītā propounds.

The foundational theme for the entire Gītā is dramatically established in the opening verse through the king's inquiry, "How did they act, O Sanjaya?" This question reveals the major theme of action, around which the teaching of the Bhagavad Gītā revolves: what action is, why and how we must act, our relation to action and nonaction, when action is right or wrong, and how we should understand action in all circumstances. The blessings that surround us in this world, symbolized by the holy place of Kurukshetra as a place of dharma; the struggles that we face in the world, represented by the desire to fight; and the dilemma of how to act in light of the tension between the two, expressed by the king's question, combine to make this opening verse of the Gītā the "seed" verse of the whole text.[8]

The Gītā's ultimate teaching—its response to the question of how souls should act in this world—is that souls should at all

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8 The practice of implanting the essential idea or "seed," around which the whole text revolves, in an opening passage or verse, often occurs in great Sanskrit works.

times and in every circumstance *act out of love*. By hearing Krishna's call to love, Arjuna discovers a more elevated state of consciousness, then an inner state of transcendence, and finally, a state of eternal freedom in which his heart can fully love God and, consequently, all beings. From this newfound fortitude and love, Arjuna is prepared to act with full-heartedness.[9]

The opening question concerning action is posed by the troubled King Dhritarāshtra. He approaches his minister Sanjaya, who functions as a sage. This forms the outer dialogue of the text. As we have seen, the king is an illegitimate ruler, misguided and selfish. Thus he is emblematic of our human condition, for we all can be, in a sense, blinded by myopic vision, by self-centeredness. We are blind kings ruling over our false kingdoms, misguided and selfish in our individual existences. Our false kingdoms are the very fleeting worlds to which we impute eternal significance, as if our impermanent lives were going to last forever. The king's troubled state leads him to inquire from his minister, who is granted exceptional vision. The Gītā also encourages us in our "blindness" to seek out someone of broad spiritual insight for divine guidance:

> Learn this
> by humble submission,
> by thorough inquiry,
> and by serving.
> They will impart
> this knowledge to you,
> for they are knowers
> and seers of the truth.
>
> (BG 4.34)

Sanjaya, who has a vision of the truth, through his outer dialogue with the king, becomes the narrator of the private inner dialogue between Krishna and Arjuna. This conversation is then meant to be contemplated deeply within the heart and lived by in our challenging worlds.

9 Full-heartedness refers to the state of *bhakti* in which the heart is brimming over with love for the divinity and therefore, for all beings in whose hearts the divinity resides.

Literary Dimensions

The journey of the soul to the divinity and the ways in which the divinity embraces the soul are described in the Bhagavad Gītā in narrative, conversational, philosophical, and didactic verse. The Gītā presents a variety of paths leading the soul to the divine, along with various manifestations of divinity. The majority of its verses focus on three concepts: (1) a philosophical vision of the human self and the nature of the precarious "outer world"; (2) the various paths and practices that lead the self to the "inner world" of transcendence and personal presence of the divine; and (3) the "innermost world" of the heart, where divinity is encountered directly in a dialogue between the soul and God, as represented by the heartfelt exchange between Arjuna and Krishna.

In effect, then, the Gītā takes us, along with Arjuna, on an internal journey to the innermost region of the heart. The hardships of the outer world often distract the soul from the inner world, hurling the soul into despondency. The Gītā demonstrates how souls can reconnect with the divine in their hearts, thereby attaining a state of full-heartedness. From this position of inner strength and fulfillment, the soul is able to return to the battlefield of the outer world with courage, fully prepared to act. The inner dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna is private; no one on the battlefield is close enough to hear or directly observe it. This intimate conversation is a deeply loving exchange that discloses the secret love song of the divinity, relieving Arjuna of his insurmountable grief and awarding him a full heart.

The voices of Krishna and Arjuna are heard throughout the Gītā, along with an occasional supporting narrative by Sanjaya. Of these, it is Krishna's voice that is heard the most.[10] Although his voice appears only once in the first chapter, it dominates the other seventeen. Arjuna's voice is prominent in the first and eleventh chapters, and is heard in only twenty-eight verses in twelve other chapters.[11] Sanjaya's voice is heard most frequently in the first chapter and is found in three others. The text concludes with five

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10 Krishna speaks in 575 verses, roughly 82 percent of the text.
11 Arjuna speaks in 83 verses, roughly 12 percent of the text.

effusive verses spoken by Sanjaya to Dhritarāshtra, thus resuming the outer dialogue, which expresses the bliss the soul derives from recalling the words spoken between Krishna and Arjuna.

For one encountering the work for the first time, it is important to note that Krishna and Arjuna are given numerous epithets in the text. Arjuna is given at least twenty other names and Krishna at least thirty-three. One encounters such names as: Govinda (one who tends the cows), Supreme Person, and Slayer of Madhu for Krishna; and Pārtha (son of Prithā), Mighty-Armed, and Bhārata (descendant of King Bharata) for Arjuna. The devotee of Krishna experiences endless delight in affectionately calling the beloved Lord by any number of these names. Indeed, another section of the Mahābhārata text, known as *Vishnu Sahasra Nāma,* "The Thousand Names of Vishnu," bespeaks this practice.[12] Therefore, it should not surprise the reader to find such variety of nomenclature in the Gītā. (The complete list of epithets for Arjuna and Krishna appears in the "Dramatis Personae.")

The Bhagavad Gītā is reminiscent of other sacred texts, in particular the Vedas and the Upanishads, which contribute to the work's synthetic character. As stated above, Vaishnava traditions, along with other Hindu traditions, revere these scriptural works for their foundational revelations. Beginning with the Vedas, a significant part is dedicated to devotional Sanskrit hymns. To compare, in the following passage Arjuna marvels at the magnificence and divinity of Krishna:[13]

> You are the indestructible,
> the supreme object of knowledge.
> You are the supreme
> resting place of all.
> You are the everpresent
> protector of lasting dharma.
> You are the eternal Person—
> so it is understood by me.
>
> (BG 11.18)

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12 Found in Anuśāsan Parvan of the Mahābhārata and in the Padma Purāna.
13 See BG 10.12–18; 11.15–31.

Here one is reminded of the Vedic worshipper whose voice extols the greatness of the divine in its myriad forms.

The Gītā is also reminiscent of the dialogues between student and teacher found in the Upanishads, the other source mirrored in the text. The following verses of the Gītā remind one of the Upanishads:

> Arjuna said:
>
> What is the description
> of one established
> in profound knowledge,
> who is established
> in perfect meditation,
> O Keshava?
> How would
> one established
> in thought speak?
> How would one sit?
> How would one move about?
>
> The Beloved Lord said:
>
> When a person gives up
> all selfish desires
> arising from the mind,
> O Pārtha,
> Satisfied within the self
> by the self alone,
> then that person
> is said to be established
> in profound knowledge.
>
> (BG 2.54–2.55)

The dominant literary structure of the Bhagavad Gītā text is a dialogue, comprised of both inner and outer dialogues. The voice of the master is by far the most prominent within the inner dialogue and reflects an important dimension of Krishna's relationship with Arjuna, that of the compassionate teacher with the submissive

student. Arjuna asks several questions in the text, and Krishna responds with didactic words. Arjuna submits to Krishna as his humble student in the following words: "I am your student—instruct me, for I have offered myself unto you" (BG 2.7). This paradigm of the student inquiring from the spiritual guide, characteristic of the Upanishads, is present early on and throughout the Gītā. It is no wonder that the Gītā is sometimes called Gitopanishad, expressing its close relationship to the Upanishads.

I have presented briefly some key literary and philosophical aspects of the Bhagavad Gītā to facilitate the reader's encounter with this great dialogue. The "Textual Illuminations" provides a more elaborate discussion of the complex theology of the work, as well as an exploration of various dimensions of the "secret love song" of the divinity. Because the Bhagavad Gītā engages many traditions of spiritual practice and philosophy and is framed within a complex epic, it is challenging for any reader to penetrate its essential message. Indeed, traditional schools of India often have taken minor practices or philosophies engaged in the text to be the whole intent of the text's message. And Western readers typically have grasped only that part which reflects something familiar from the Abrahamic traditions, thereby ignoring essential themes of the Gītā.

My purpose, therefore, is to offer the reader an overall vision derived directly from the text that allows one to appreciate every aspect of the work. This vision is one of love, beginning with God's heart yearning for the love of souls. For now, I invite the reader to encounter the ideas and messages of this complex text with an open heart. As you consider the predicament of the soft-hearted Arjuna, take the journey along with him into your own heart, where you will begin to experience an authentic ancient voice of spiritual wisdom that for millennia has moved the hearts of countless millions the world over.

Bhagavad Gītā

Dramatis Personae

(in order of appearance)

Dhritarāshtra

Speaker of the first verse; the king to whom the whole text is narrated, for whose throne the war is being fought

Sanjaya

Narrator; the king's minister, who has been given special power to hear and see events on the battlefield and the great dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna

Duryodhana

A leading general of the Kauravas; cousin of Arjuna; eldest son of Dhritarāshtra; the prime instigator of the fratricidal conflict

Arjuna

A leading general of the Pāndavas; cousin of Duryodhana; son of Pāndu (the younger brother of Dhritarāshtra), who speaks with Krishna throughout the text (see Epithets below)

The Beloved Lord

Krishna, Arjuna's chariot driver, who imparts teachings and engages in personal dialogue with Arjuna for the greater part of the text (see Epithets below)

The Setting

Geographic location: the holy site of Kurukshetra ("the field of Kuru"), a rural area located in central northern India about one hundred miles north of Delhi.

The scene on the Kurukshetra battlefield: The massive opposing armies, composed of the righteous army of the sons of Pāndu, the Pāndavas, led by Arjuna, and the unrighteous army of the sons of Dhritarāshtra, the Kurus, led by Duryodhana, the eldest son. On his chariot, Krishna drives Arjuna into the middle of the battlefield, between the armies, to survey the warriors and battle scene.

Epithets

Arjuna

Pāndava
Dhananjaya
Gudākesha
Pārtha
Son of Kuntī
Scorcher of the Enemy
Bhārata
Best Among Men
Mighty-Armed
Kaunteya
Descendant of Kuru
Conqueror of Wealth
Blameless One
Leader of the Bharatas
Subduer of the Enemy
Best of the Kurus
Son of Pāndu
Son of Kuru
Best of the Bharatas
Best of the Embodied
Destroyer of the Enemy
Hero of the Kurus
Masterful Archer
Fighter of the Enemy
Tiger Among Men
Holder of the Bow

The Beloved Lord, Krishna

Mādhava
Hrishīkesha
Achyuta
Keshava
Govinda
Madhusūdhana
Janārdana
Descendant of Vrishni
Slayer of the Enemy
Vārshneya
Ultimate Person
Supreme Person
Source of Beings
Divinity of Divinities
Master of the Universe
Yogi
One with Lotus-like Eyes
Highest Supreme Lord
Ultimate Person
Supreme Lord of Yoga
Lord
Hari
Divinity
All-Pervasive Supreme Lord
Mighty Self
Mighty-Armed
Lord of Divinities
Vishnu
Best of Divinities
Extraordinary Self
Unlimited Lord
One of Unlimited Form
Everything
Yādava
Friend
Unfathomable One
One of Incomparable Being
Thousand-Armed One
Universal Form
Vāsudeva
Majestic One
Slayer of Keshi

Translation

I

Arjuna's Conflict and Despair

Dhritarāshtra said:

On the field of dharma,
  on the field of Kuru,
  assembled together
  desiring to fight,
Were my armies
  and indeed those
  of the sons of Pāndu—
  how did they act, O Sanjaya?[1] I

---

1 Dhritarāshtra: The hard-hearted king of the Kurus, blind from birth, while sitting in his palace, desires to know what is occurring on the battlefield, where a civil war between his sons and nephews, the heroic sons of his brother Pāndu, is about to begin.

On the field of dharma: Translates *dharma-kṣetre*. This phrase tells the reader that the field of Kuru, or Kurukshetra, is a holy place, a place of dharma (see meaning of *dharma* below).

On the field of Kuru: Translates *kuru-kṣetre,* the name of the holy place Kurukshetra, about 100 miles north of Delhi, India's modern capital city.

Dharma: A state of righteousness, a personal calling to goodness, cosmic harmony, sound ethical law, or justice. The very first word in the opening Sanskrit verse.

Kuru: Name of a common ancestral king for the leaders of both armies, the sons of Dhritarāshtra and the sons of his brother, Pāndu.

The sons of Pāndu: Also known as the Pāndavas, the five sons of King Pāndu, whose names are presented in verses 15 and 16 below; also, the name of the army led by Arjuna.

Pāndu: The younger brother of Dhritarāshtra, who was king before his untimely death.

How did they act: The word *act* translates an active form of the verbal root *kṛ*, which means "to act." The noun form, *karma,* meaning "action," is a major theme of the BG. All words that derive from this verbal root are here translated with some form of the word *act*.

Sanjaya: The king's minister, endowed by Vyāsa with the power to see what is transpiring on the battlefield at every moment, recounts these events to the king.

Sanjaya said:

Now seeing the armies
of the Pāndavas arrayed
in battle formation,
King Duryodhana,
approaching his teacher,
spoke these words:[2] 2

[Duryodhana said:]

Behold these mighty warriors
of the sons of Pāndu,
O Revered Teacher,
Arrayed in
battle formation
by the son of Drupada,
your own skillful student.[3] 3

Here are their heroes,
powerful archers equal
to Bhīma and Arjuna in battle:
Yuyudhāna and Virāta,
and King Drupada,
the great chariot warrior;[4] 4

---

2 Pāndavas: The sons of the Pāndus and the army led by Arjuna. Beginning with this verse, Duryodhana reviews the powerful warriors on the opposing side.

King Duryodhana: The oldest son of King Dhritarāshtra and the leading general of the Kuru warriors who oppose the righteous Pāndavas. The name Duryodhana means "dirty fighter." This is the first of nine consecutive verses spoken by Duryodhana (BG 1.3–11).

His teacher: Refers to Dronacharya, the great teacher of warfare for both Arjuna and Duryodhana.

3 In verses 3 through 6, Duryodhana, the leader of the unrighteous Kurus, observes the powerful warriors in the opposing army, led by Arjuna, his cousin. In verses 7 through 11, he then speaks about the superior power of his own men.

The son of Drupada: Dhristadyumna, the leading commander of the Pāndavas.

4 Bhima: One of five Pāndava brothers known to be a great warrior.

Arjuna: One of five Pāndava brothers who lead the Pāndava army; the loving friend of Krishna to whom the teachings of the BG are spoken.

Yuyudhāna and the other men named in this verse, as well as in the following two verses, are all well-known and powerful warriors in the Pāndava army.

Dhrishtaketu, Chetikāna,
and the heroic king of Kāshi;
Purojit and Kuntibhoja,
and Shaibya, leader among men; 5

And the courageous
Yudhāmanyu, also
the valorous Uttamaujas;
The son of Subhadrā
and the sons of Draupadi—
all certainly great chariot warriors.[5] 6

However, our own men,
the most distinguished—
learn about them,
O Best of the Twice-Born.
To inform you,
I will tell you the names
of those who are
the leaders of my forces.[6] 7

They are yourself and Bhīshma,
also Karna and Kripa,
victorious in battle;
Also Ashwatthāma
and Vikarna, and indeed,
the son of Somadatta;[7] 8

---

5 Son of Subhadrā: Refers to Abhimanyu; Subhadrā is Krishna's sister.

Sons of Draupadi: Draupadi is the wife of each of the five Pāndavas, each with whom she has a son.

6 O Best of the Twice-born: Translates *dvijottama,* addressing Duryodhana's teacher, Drona, as the best of the Brahmins.

7 Bhīshma: The most venerated of the Kaurava warriors, who is the grand uncle of the Pāndavas.

Karna: A half-brother and chief rival of Arjuna and a highly skilled bowman.

Kripa and the other warriors mentioned here are all prominent in the opposing Kaurava army.

And many other heroes
who are willing to relinquish
their lives for my sake—
Wielding various weapons,
all are highly skilled in battle. 9

Unlimited are our forces
protected by Bhīshma,
Whereas limited are their forces
protected by Bhīma.[8] 10

Thus in all maneuvers
from your respective positions,
You must certainly guard Bhīshma—
indeed, every one of you.[9] 11

[Sanjaya continued:]

Giving him [Duryodhana] a thrill,
the revered elder
of the Kurus [Bhīshma]
Cried out the roar
of a lion and blew
his conch with great vigor. 12

Then conches and kettledrums,
cymbals, drums, and trumpets
Were all sounded at once—
the vibration became tumultuous. 13

---

8 Unlimited: Translates the word *aparyāptam,* also meaning paradoxically, "inadequate." Similarly, "limited," in the second half of the verse, translates *paryāptam,* the positive form of this word, which also means "adequate." This double meaning expresses how Duryodhana's overconfidence compensates for his insecurity regarding the outcome of the battle.

9 Duryodhana, after directing his words to his teacher, now turns to his men to instruct them.

Thereupon, standing
in a magnificent chariot
yoked with white horses,
Mādhava [Krishna]
and the Pāndava [Arjuna]
sounded their divine conch shells.[10] 14

Hrishīkesha [Krishna]
blew the conch Panchajanya;
Dhananjaya [Arjuna]
blew the conch Devadatta;
And Bhīma,
the voracious eater
who is terrifying in action,
blew the great conch Paundra.[11] 15

King Yudhishthira,
the son of Kuntī,
blew his conch Anantavijaya;
While Nakula and Sahadeva
blew their conches,
Sughosha and Manipushpaka.[12] 16

---

10 Mādhava: Name of Krishna meaning "a descendant of Madhu" (of the Yadu dynasty). This name indicates Krishna's distant family relationship with Arjuna, whose ancestry goes back to Puru. Yadu and Puru were sons of the great king Yayāti. This name is also associated with Krishna as the husband of the Great Goddess, Lakshmī Devī, the embodiment of all auspiciousness, success, prosperity, and happiness. This is the first verse in which Krishna is introduced.

11 Hrishīkesha: Name of Krishna meaning "the lord of the senses."

Dhananjaya: Name of Arjuna throughout the BG, meaning "conqueror of wealth."

Bhīma: One of the five Pāndavas and brother of Arjuna. The other three brothers are named in the next verse.

12 Yudhishthira: The eldest of the Pāndava brothers.

Nakula and Sahadeva: Two Pāndava brothers.

Also, the king of Kāshi,
an expert archer,
and Shikhandī,
a great chariot warrior;
Dhrishtadhyumna and Virāta,
along with Sātyaki,
the unconquerable; 17

Drupada and the sons
of Draupadī,
grouped together,
O Lord of the Earth;
And the mighty-armed
son of Subhadrā—
all of them blew
their conches one by one.[13] 18

That sound shattered the hearts
of the sons of Dhritarāshtra,
And indeed, the tumult caused
the heavens and earth to resound.[14] 19

---

13 The son of Subhadrā: Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna's second wife.

O Lord of the Earth: An epithet for Dhritarāshtra, the king to whom Sanjaya narrates this text.

14 The sons of Dhritarāshtra: Sanjaya identifies Dhritarāshtra's sons using a slightly altered Sanskrit form of the king's name while narrating the events occurring far from the king. Thus Sanjaya is not ignoring the fact that the king sits before him by speaking of him in the third person. Rather, in Sanskrit, offspring are identified by a slightly altered form of the father's name, here as Dhārtarāshtra.

Thus observing
the sons of Dhritarāshtra
lined up in battle formation,
The Pāndava [Arjuna],
his chariot displaying
the banner of the monkey,
lifted his bow as weapons
began to clash.[15] 20

Then, O Lord of the Earth,
to Hrishīkesha,
he spoke these words:
Between the two armies
place my chariot,
O Achyuta [Krishna],[16] 21

So that I may look upon those
who are standing here
desiring battle—
With whom
must I battle while
engaging in this war? 22

I look upon those
about to engage in battle,
who are assembled here
Desiring to please
the evil-minded son
of Dhritarāshtra in battle.[17] 23

---

15 The Pāndava: A son of King Pāndu, referring to Arjuna.

The banner of the monkey: The particular monkey referred to here is Hanumān, the great monkey servant of Rāma, a manifestation of Vishnu.

16 O Lord of the Earth: This epithet refers to Dhritarāshtra.

17 The evil-minded son of Dhritarāshtra: Duryodhana, who leads the Kuru army.

[Sanjaya continued:]

Hrishīkesha, thus addressed
by Gudākesha [Arjuna],
O Bhārata [Dhritarāshtra],
Placed his magnificent chariot
between the two armies.[18] 24

Facing Bhīshma, Drona,
and all the kings
of the earth,
He [Krishna] said,
"O Pārtha [Arjuna],
behold these Kurus
assembled here!" 25

Pārtha saw,
standing there—
fathers, then grandfathers,
Teachers, maternal uncles,
brothers, sons, grandsons,
as well as companions; 26

Fathers-in-law,
and even dear friends,
present in both battalions.
The Son of Kuntī [Arjuna],
observing all of them,
his kinsmen arrayed for battle; 27

---

18 O Bhārata: Son of Bharata, here referring to Dhritarāshtra. Gudākesha: "The full-haired one."

Filled with deep compassion
and falling into despair,
spoke the following:
Seeing my own relations,
O Krishna, standing
nearby ready to fight,[19] 28

My limbs are sinking down
and my mouth has
become very dry.
Also, my body trembles
and the hairs of
my limbs stand on end. 29

My bow, Gāndīva,
falls from my hand
and even my skin is burning.
I also am unable
to stand steadily and
my mind seems to be reeling. 30

And I perceive signs of chaos,
terrible reversals,
O Keshava [Krishna],
And I foresee
no benefit in slaying
my own relations in battle.[20] 31

---

19 With deep compassion: Translates *kṛpayā parayā*.

Falling into despair: Translates *viṣīdan*.

20 Keshava: Name of Krishna meaning "the one with beautiful hair."

I do not desire victory,
O Krishna,
nor a kingdom,
nor happiness.
What use is a kingdom to us,
O Govinda [Krishna]?
What is the use of pleasures
or purpose in living?[21] 32

Those persons for
whose sake we desire
such kingdom, pleasures,
and happiness—
They stand here arrayed
in battle readiness,
relinquishing
their lives and wealth: 33

Our teachers,
fathers, and sons;
also grandfathers,
Maternal uncles,
fathers-in-law,
grandsons,
brothers-in-law,
and other kinsmen. 34

---

21 Govinda: Name of Krishna meaning "the one who herds the cows." Considered to be an especially endearing and intimate name for Krishna.

I do not wish to slay them,
even those who are
about to slay,
O Madhusūdana [Krishna],
Even for the rule
of the three worlds—
how much less, then,
for the rule of the earth?[22] 35

What joy would there be for us,
O Janārdana [Krishna],
in slaying the sons
of Dhritarāshtra?
Certainly misfortune
would fall upon us
having slain them
whose bows are drawn.[23] 36

Therefore, we are not entitled
to slay the sons of
Dhritarāshtra,
our kinsmen.
Indeed, in slaying
our own relations,
how could we realize
happiness, O Mādhava?[24] 37

---

22 Madhusūdana: "Slayer of the demon Madhu," a well-known name for Krishna. Arjuna's use of this name suggests, "You slay demons, but even you don't slay persons whom you love and revere!"

23 Janārdana: Name of Krishna meaning "one who inspires human beings."

Misfortune: Translates *pāpa,* often rendered as "sin," which carries too much of the narrower Christian sense. I have chosen to translate as "misfortune" or "trouble," indicating both the unfortunate things that can befall a person as well as something unfortunate that a person has caused. The word *pāpa* means anything disturbing that creates conflict internally and externally, an impediment in one's spiritual evolution causing effects that impede one's progress. The word *sin* has a much narrower application that carries a particular Christian sense not present in the Sanskrit word *pāpa.*

24 Happiness: Translates *sukhinaḥ.*

Even if, with their thoughts
overcome by greed,
they do not perceive
The harm caused by acts
that destroy the family,
nor the crime in
harming a friend;[25] 38

Still, how can we not know
to turn away from
this wrongdoing,
With our understanding of
the harm caused by acts
that destroy the family,
O Janārdana?[26] 39

In destroying the family,
the eternal dharma
of the family is lost.
When dharma is lost,
whatever opposes dharma
also overcomes the entire family.[27] 40

Because of the prevalence
of that which opposes dharma,
the women of the family
become degraded.
When the women are degraded,
O Descendant of Vrishni [Krishna],
disorder between classes of society arises.[28] 41

---

25 Greed: Translates *lobha*.
Destroy the family: Translates *kula-kṣaya*.
Crime in harming a friend: Translates *mitra-droha*.
26 Wrongdoing: Translates *pāpa*.
Harm: Translates *doṣa*.
27 Dharma of the family: Translates *kula-dharma*.
Whatever opposes dharma: Translates *adharma*, meaning lawlessness, chaos, or evil.
28 Disorder between classes of society: Translates *varṇa-saṁkaraḥ*. Sometimes taken as "confusion of caste."

This disorder certainly leads
to a place of torment
for destroyers of the family
and the family itself.
Indeed, the spirits of
their ancestors fall,
deprived of their ritual
offerings of rice and water. 42

By these wrongdoings of
the destroyers of the family,
which produce disorder
between the classes of society,
The dharmas of
lineages are ruined,
along with the eternal
dharma of the family.[29] 43

When the family dharma
of human beings
has been ruined,
O Janārdana,
Dwelling in a place of torment
certainly becomes their fate—
so we have heard
from sacred sources. 44

Ah yes!
what great misfortune
we are resolved to enact,
For which, out of greed
for the happiness of royalty,
we are prepared to slay
our own people. 45

29 The dharmas of lineages: Translates *jāti-dharmāḥ*, meaning the "dharmas of the castes." The BG focuses, however, mostly on varṇa, or the four major classes of society.

If without my acting
in opposition
and without any
weapons for myself,
The sons of Dhritarāshtra,
with weapons in their hands,
should slay me in battle—
that would be
a greater peace for me! 46

Thus speaking
in the midst of conflict,
Arjuna sat upon
the seat of the chariot.
Casting aside
his bow and arrow,
his mind was
tormented by sorrow. 47

2

The Way of Discernment

Sanjaya said:

To him who was thus
  overwhelmed by compassion,
  whose troubled eyes were
  full of tears,
Who was deeply depressed,
  Madhusūdana
  spoke these words. 1

The Beloved Lord said:

From where
  does your weakness
  come at this time of crisis?
It is not befitting
  the noble-minded,
  nor does it lead
  to celestial realms—
  it causes disgrace, O Arjuna.[1] 2

---

1 The Beloved Lord: Translates *bhagavān* or *bhagavat,* the same word as in the title—an epithet that refers to Krishna, which introduces Krishna's words throughout the text. This is the first verse in which the words of Krishna are introduced.

Do not yield to
this weakness, O Pārtha;
it is inappropriate for you.
Relinquishing this poor
faint-heartedness,
stand up,
O Scorcher of the Enemy! 3

Arjuna said:

How shall I,
in battle against
Bhīshma and Drona,
O Madhusūdana,
Fight back with arrows
against those who
are worthy of respect,
O Slayer of the Enemy? 4

Indeed, rather than slaying
greatly revered gurus,
It would be better
to subsist in this world
by begging for alms.
For slaying such gurus,
though they desire
selfish gain in this world,
Surely would taint
with their blood
any pleasures I might enjoy.[2] 5

---

2 Desire: Translates the word *kāma*. This word, simply, means "desire," but most often carries the negative sense of "selfish" or "worldly" desire throughout the BG.

And we know not
which of the two is better:
Whether we should conquer them
or they should conquer us.
For having slain them
we should not wish to live—
They who are standing here before us,
the sons of Dhritarāshtra.[3] 6

My very being
is afflicted by a piteous
weakness of spirit.
My thoughts on dharma
are completely bewildered.
I ask you, tell me what
is definitely better for me!
I am your student—
instruct me, for I have
offered myself unto you. 7

Indeed, I cannot foresee
what would dispel
This grief that is
drying up my senses,
Even if achieving an unrivaled
flourishing kingdom on earth,
Or the sovereignty
of celestial beings.[4] 8

---

3 Up until this verse, Arjuna has been speaking in the first person singular; here Arjuna speaks in the first person plural, "we," referring to himself and the leading generals of his army.

4 Celestial beings: Translates the plural form of *sura*.

Sanjaya said:

Thus having spoken
to Hrishīkesha,
Gudākesha,
the subduer of the enemy,
Said to Govinda,
"I shall not fight!"
Having spoken thus,
he fell silent. 9

Hrishīkesha,
as if about to laugh,
O Bhārata [Dhritarāshtra],
In the midst of the two armies,
spoke these words to him
who was feeling despondent. 10

The Beloved Lord said:

You have grieved for that
which is not worthy of grief,
and yet you speak words
of profound knowledge.
The learned grieve
neither for those
who have passed on,
nor for those
who have not departed.[5] 11

5 Krishna's teachings commence with this verse.

Profound knowledge: Translates *prajñā*, often rendered as "wisdom."

Never, truly,
  have I ever not existed—
  nor you, nor these kings
  who protect the people,
And never
  shall any of us
  ever cease to be,
  now or forevermore. 12

Just as the embodied
  while in this body
  passes through childhood,
  youth, and old age,
So also the embodied
  attains another body—
  the wise person
  is not bewildered by this. 13

Certainly, contact
  of the senses with matter,
  O Kaunteya [Arjuna],
  which results in cold, heat,
  happiness, and suffering,
Comes and goes,
  and is impermanent—
  you must strive
  to tolerate this,
  O Bhārata [Arjuna]. 14

Indeed, the person whom
  these do not trouble,
  O Best Among Men,
The wise one for whom
  suffering and happiness
  are the same—
  that one is prepared
  for immortality. 15

Of the impermanent
one finds no being;
one finds no nonbeing
of the permanent.
Indeed, the certainty
of both of these
has been perceived
by seers of the truth. 16

Now, know that
to be indestructible
by which all this
is pervaded.
No one is able
to bring about
the destruction
of the everpresent. 17

These bodies,
said to have an end,
belong to the embodied,
which is eternal,
Indestructible,
and immeasurable—
therefore fight,
O Bhārata! 18

One who considers
it [the self] a slayer,
and one who thinks
it is slain,
Both of these
fail to understand—
it does not slay,
nor is it slain. 19

It does not take birth,
nor does it ever die.
Such a being has never
come into being,
nor shall it ever
come to be.
It is unborn, eternal,
everlasting,
and primeval.
It is not slain
when the body is slain.[6] 20

One who knows this [self]
to be indestructible,
eternal, unborn,
and everpresent—
How and whom does
that person slay, O Pārtha?
And whom does
that one cause to slay? 21

As a person abandoning
worn-out garments
acquires other new ones,
So the embodied,
abandoning worn-out bodies,
enters other new ones. 22

---

6 This verse continues the chapter's theme on the self's eternal presence of being. The self has not come into existence at any time in the past nor does it have any end in the future (BG 2.12). If the self were not to exist at any time, then it would have no true being; and of the self's being there can be no nonexistence (BG 2.16). In the first quarter of this verse, the self does not take birth nor does it die. In the second quarter, it is a being (*bhūya*) that is eternally present, which has never come into being (*bhūtvā*) and shall never come into being (*bhavitā*). Although the noun "being," referring to the self (*bhūya*), can be taken as a verb or an adverb, the most compelling translation as a noun is dictated by its philosophical context found in the two previous aforementioned verses. Most other translations render this verse philosophically inconsistent with these preceding verses.

Weapons do not pierce it,
fire does not burn it,
And water does not moisten it;
nor does wind wither it. 23

It cannot be pierced;
it cannot be burned,
moistened, or
even withered;
Eternal,
present everywhere,
stationary, immovable—
it is everlasting.[7] 24

This [self] is unmanifest,
it is inconceivable,
it is spoken of
as unchangeable.
Therefore,
knowing this to be so,
you should not grieve. 25

Further, if you think
of this [self] as
always being born
or always dying—
Even then,
O Mighty-Armed,
you should not
grieve for this. 26

---

7 Present everywhere: Translates *sarva-gataḥ*. This phrase can mean that the self is present everywhere in the body, or that selves permeate the whole universe. It can also refer to the Self, namely the divinity, who is present everywhere in the universe. Thus the BG's idea of self can indicate either the individual or the supreme self. The Sanskrit word *ātman* is translated as "self" to indicate the self of the living being, or "Self" to indicate the supreme divinity present within the very self of every living being (as first seen in BG 4.6). Many verses can be taken as speaking about both simultaneously.

Indeed, for one who is born
  death is certain,
  and for one who has died
  birth is certain.
Therefore, since this
  process is inevitable,
  you ought not to grieve. 27

Unmanifest are the beginnings
  of beings; manifest are
  their interims, O Bhārata;
Then again, unmanifest
  are their endings—
  what is lamentable about this? 28

Rarely, someone
  perceives this [self];
Rarely, another
  also speaks of it.
And rarely, indeed,
  another hears about it;
Even having heard about it,
  no one truly knows it. 29

The embodied,
  eternally indestructible,
  dwells within the body
  of everyone, O Bhārata.
Therefore you
  should not grieve
  for any living being. 30

Moreover, considering
your own dharma,
you should not waver.
Truly, for a warrior,
nothing better exists
than a battle fought
according to dharma. 31

And if by good fortune
what is gained
is an opened door
to the celestial world,
Happy are the warriors,
O Pārtha,
who obtain such a fight. 32

Now, if you should not
undertake this battle,
which is in accordance
with dharma,
Then, abandoning
your own dharma
and reputation,
you shall meet
with misfortune. 33

Also, people certainly will speak
of your undying infamy.
And for one who has been honored,
such infamy is worse than death. 34

The great chariot warriors
  will believe you have retreated
  from battle out of fear.
And among those who once
  held you in high esteem,
  you shall come to be taken lightly. 35

And many unspeakable words
  your enemies
  will speak of you,
Deriding your ability—
  now what could be
  greater misery than this? 36

Either having been slain
  you shall reach the celestial world,
  or conquering
  you shall enjoy the earth.
Therefore, rise up,
  O Kaunteya,
  acting with firm
  resolve for battle. 37

Acting the same in
  happiness and suffering,
  gain and loss,
  victory and defeat,
Then prepare for battle—
  thus you shall not
  suffer misfortune. 38

This discernment
has been explained to you
in [the philosophy of] Sānkhya;
now hear about this
in [the practice of] yoga.
Be absorbed in yoga
with discernment, O Pārtha,
by which you shall throw off
the bondage of action.[8] 39

Here there is no loss of effort,
nor is any diminution found.
Even a little of this dharma
delivers one from great danger. 40

Discernment that is resolute in nature
is singular in this world,
O Descendant of Kuru [Arjuna],
For many-branched and endless
is the discernment
of those who are irresolute. 41

---

8 Discernment: Translates *buddhi,* an important word that appears fifty-three times in the text. The word can have the meanings of "intelligence," "wisdom," "insight," or "understanding." *Discernment* is used here because it gives the active sense engaged in the BG.

Sānkhya: This term refers to the theistic system of Sānkhya, which shares much of its philosophy with the non-theistic Sānkhya school, focusing on the ultimate elements and objects of this world. It is one of six primary philosophical systems, including Yoga, Mīmāmsā, Vedānta, Nyāya, and Vaisheshika.

Yoga: Refers to the process that connects the individual self to the supreme Self. It is a complex term that can either refer to any one of the various means for achieving union with the divine or any one of the various perfectional states achievable in union with the divine. This is the first appearance of this word in the BG. It appears seventy-eight times in its noun form.

Absorbed in yoga: Translates *yukta,* the verbal form of the well-known word *yoga,* which has the essential meaning of "connection" or "union," referring to the connection of the self to the Supreme. This word appears thirty-six times in the BG. I have translated as "absorbed in yoga."

Those who lack understanding
speak this flowery language,
Delighted by the words
of the Vedas, O Pārtha,
declaring, "There is nothing else."[9] 42

For the self full of desire,
whose intent is on
the celestial world,
[this flowery language]
bestows another birth
as the fruit of action.
Preoccupied with
various ritualistic acts,
[this self] is directed
toward the goal of worldly
pleasure and power. 43

For those attached to
worldly pleasure and power,
whose thoughts are stolen
away by this [flowery language],
Discernment that
is resolute in nature
is not discovered
in perfect meditation.[10] 44

---

9 The Vedas: The original sacred writings of India, consisting of numerous Sanskrit hymns that were originally transmitted orally by priestly families, and then later preserved in written form.

10 Perfect meditation: Translates *samādhi,* the attainment of total absorption in which the meditator becomes self-forgetful and is only aware of the object of meditation. This perfect meditative state in yoga is the eighth "limb" in the Ashtānga Yoga system as described by Patanjali.

The domain of the Vedas
is the three essential 'qualities';
be free of these three
'qualities', O Arjuna,
Beyond duality,
always established
in pure existence, beyond
acquisitions and security,
in possession of one's self.[11] 45

As much value
as there is in a well
when all about it
waters flow abundantly,
Such is the value
of all the Vedas
for a Brahmin who
has realized knowledge.[12] 46

It is in action alone
that you have a claim,
never at any time to
the fruits of such action.
Never let the fruits of action
be your motive;
never let your attachment
be to inaction. 47

---

11 Three 'qualities': Translates *traigunya*. The word *guṇa,* or 'quality', can also mean "strand" or "string" or "rope," expressing how these primary qualities arising from primordial nature bind one like a rope. It is a technical term used in Sānkhya philosophy that is a recurring theme in the BG.

12 Brahmin: The priestly or learned class of society, one of four *varṇas* that make the social order whole and complete. Note that this word is not to be confused with Brahman, meaning the ultimate reality or supreme spirit.

Established in yoga,
perform actions,
having relinquished attachment,
O Conqueror of Wealth [Arjuna],
While remaining the same
in success and in no success—
such sameness is said to be yoga. 48

Still, action is by far inferior
to the yoga of discernment,
O Conqueror of Wealth.
Seek shelter in discernment—
miserly are those
who are motivated
by the fruits [of action]. 49

One absorbed in
the yoga of discernment
casts off in this world
both good and bad acts.
Therefore,
be absorbed in yoga,
for yoga is skillfulness
in action. 50

Indeed, those wise ones
who are absorbed
in the yoga of discernment,
relinquishing the fruits
born of action,
Who are freed
from the bondage
of repeated births,
go to a place beyond suffering. 51

When your discernment
crosses beyond the jungle
of bewilderment,
Then you shall become
completely indifferent
to that which is to be heard
and that which has been heard.[13] 52

When this [discernment]
is no longer perplexed
by the heard scriptures,
when it shall remain
without change,
When discernment
is unchanging within
perfect meditation—
then you shall attain yoga. 53

Arjuna said:

What is the description
of one established
in profound knowledge,
who is established
in perfect meditation,
O Keshava?
How would
one established
in thought speak?
How would one sit?
How would one move about? 54

13 That which has been heard: Refers to *śrūti,* the Vedas. Another term for the Vedas found in the BG is *śabda-brahma,* "the sound of Brahman." The Vedas offer worldly results, but superficial reading of this text is discouraged in the BG; Krishna encourages a more esoteric reading that reveals himself: "And by all the Vedas only I am to be known" (BG 15.15).

The Beloved Lord said:

When a person gives up
all selfish desires
arising from the mind,
O Pārtha,
Satisfied within the self
by the self alone,
then that person
is said to be established
in profound knowledge. 55

One whose mind is
undisturbed in suffering,
who is free from desire
in all kinds of happiness,
Whose passion, fear,
and anger have departed—
such a person,
established in thought,
is said to be a sage. 56

One who, everywhere,
is without sentimentality
upon encountering this or that,
things pleasant or unpleasant,
Who neither rejoices nor despises—
the profound knowledge
of such a person
is firmly established. 57

And when one withdraws
completely,
as a tortoise
all of its limbs,
The senses from
their sense objects—
the profound knowledge
of such a person
is firmly established. 58

Sense objects fade away
for the embodied who
does not partake of them,
Except for the taste—
for one who has
seen the Supreme,
even this taste fades. 59

Indeed, even for one
who is striving,
O Kaunteya,
for the person
of discrimination,
The impetuous senses
forcibly carry away
the mind. 60

Restraining all these [senses],
one should be seated
while absorbed in yoga,
wholly intent on me.
For one whose senses
are under control—
for that one,
profound knowledge
is firmly established.[14] 61

For a person dwelling
on the objects of the senses,
attachment to them develops;
From attachment,
selfish desire develops;
from desire, anger develops. 62

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14 This is the first verse in which Krishna introduces the practice of meditation on him, with the words *mat-paraḥ*, "wholly intent on me."

From anger comes
bewilderment;
from bewilderment,
disturbed memory;
From disturbed memory,
loss of discernment;
from loss of discernment
one becomes lost. 63

Without being absorbed
in attraction and repulsion
as the senses are moving
toward their objects—
With self-restraint,
the self that
can be governed
attains calmness. 64

In calmness,
the cessation of all
one's suffering occurs.
Indeed, for one whose
thought has been calmed,
discernment is quickly established. 65

There is no discernment for one
who is not absorbed in yoga;
and for one not absorbed in yoga,
there is no meditative state;
And for one who has
no meditative state,
there is no peace—
for one who is not peaceful,
from where is happiness to come? 66

Indeed, when the mind
is being pulled
by the roaming senses,
Then just one of them
can carry away one's
profound knowledge,
as wind does a ship at sea. 67

Therefore,
O Mighty-Armed,
whosoever has
completely withdrawn
The senses from
the objects of the senses—
the profound knowledge of
such a person is firmly established. 68

During that which is night
for all beings,
the deeply meditative
person is awake.
During that time in which
beings are awake,
that is night for
the insightful sage.[15] 69

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15 The deeply meditative person: Translates the word *saṁyamī,* meaning a person absorbed in the yoga processes of *saṁyama*. The term *saṁyama* refers to the final three "limbs of yoga" in the Patanjali Yoga Sūtra: *dhāraṇa* ("concentration"), *dhyāna* ("meditation"), and *samādhi* ("total absorption in perfect meditation"). See Yoga Sūtra 3.4.

Continually being filled,
the ocean remains unmoved
and stands still, though
waters enter into it.
That person into whom
all desires enter
in this same way
attains peace—
not one who is desirous
to fulfill such desires. 70

Abandoning all selfish desires,
a person moves through life
free from worldly longings,
Without the sense of 'mine',
without the notion
of 'I am acting'—
that one attains peace.[16] 71

---

16 Without the sense of 'mine': Translates *nirmama,* meaning literally, "without mine." This term conveys a state of being that is without the false sense of possessiveness. Because of the temporary nature of things in this world, no one actually possesses anything permanently, yet one holds on to such a conception.

Without the notion of 'I am acting': Translates *nirahaṁkāra,* meaning literally, "without I am acting." The phrase "I am acting" connotes egocenteredness; an essential message of the BG is the need for the self to develop a vision of theocenteredness, one centered upon the divinity, implied by the phrase "without the notion of 'I am acting'." The term "I am acting" (*ahaṁkāra*) conveys the idea that a person falsely thinks oneself to be acting independently of the various physical, cosmic, and spiritual aspects of "action," explained in later verses. It conveys the false confidence of mistaken identity, wherein one feels oneself to be in complete control, falsely identified with the body and the impermanent roles one assumes in this world. In a realized state, a person "without the notion of 'I am acting' " (*nirahaṁkāra*) no longer identifies with anything temporary, including one's body, gender, family, country, race, etc., nor does one claim ownership or possession of anything (*nirmama*).

The added single quotation marks for "mine" and for "I am acting" are meant to distinguish this type of translated word or phrase from those containing double quotation marks, assigned because they are indicated in the text itself.

This is the state of
the feminine energy
of Brahman, O Pārtha,
having attained which
one is not bewildered.
Being established in this,
even if only at
the end of one's life,
one reaches
the Nirvāna of Brahman.[17]

72

17 The feminine energy of Brahman: Translates the word *brāhmī*. Quite literally, it is the *śakti*, or "female energy," of Brahman. This word is most often taken as a neutered adjective in this verse, meaning simply a Brahman-like state. However, this latter approach ignores the strong feminine presence in the verse, expressed by three feminine gendered words: a pronoun (*eṣā*), and two nouns (*brāhmī* and *sthiti*), all found in the first quarter line. Note that the key word of this chapter, namely *buddhi*, "discernment," is also feminine gendered. Thus this chapter concludes that the state of Brahman's feminine energy supports the nature of the self's discernment.

Nirvāna: Literally, "blown out," meaning "the extinguishing of any worldly existence or experience whatsoever," a spiritual state found within the Brahman that entails a complete calming of the senses, often described as a state of serenity and peacefulness.

Brahman: Supreme spiritual existence, the eternal ultimate reality or the whole of reality. This word is to be distinguished from the words Brahmin and Brahmā. A Brahmin is a person of the priestly or educator class belonging to traditional Indian society, and its first instance is in BG 2.46. Brahmā is the cosmic deity of creation (see BG 8.16), whose counterpart is Shiva, the deity of cosmic transformation or dissolution.

3

The Way of Action

Arjuna said:

If you consider discernment
to be better than action,
O Janārdana,
Then why do you engage me
in dreadful action,
O Keshava? 1

With very confusing words,
you seem to bewilder
my intellect.
Therefore, speak definitely
of that one thing by which
I may attain the greater good. 2

The Beloved Lord said:

In this world
the established path is twofold,
as stated previously by me,
O Blameless One:
The yoga of knowledge
for the followers of Sānkhya,
and the yoga of action
for the yogis.[1] 3

---

1 Yogis: Plural of *yogi,* meaning a practitioner of yoga. The word appears twenty-eight times in the BG, and is also in the English lexicon.

Not by avoiding actions
does a person gain
freedom from action,
And not by renunciation
alone does a person
attain perfection. 4

Certainly no one,
not even for a moment,
ever lives without
performing action.
Indeed, against one's will,
everyone is forced
to perform action
by the 'qualities' born
of primordial nature.[2] 5

Having controlled
the senses of action,
one who continues
with the mind to dwell
On the objects of the senses—
that one,
whose self is bewildered,
is called one with false behavior. 6

---

2 The 'qualities': Translates the plural form of *guṇa,* which is translated by this word throughout this translation. The plural of *guṇa* refers to the three primary qualities of nature, *sattva, rajas,* and *tamas,* which are first presented in BG 7.12. In general, these fundamental distinctions describe degrees of self-centeredness and conditions of the heart: self-giving, selfish, self-destructive; or capacities of the soul to illumine the worldly condition: transparency, translucency, opacity; or level s of consciousness: conscious, subconscious, unconscious. The Gītā's teachings on the essential qualities encourage the soul to attain its original state beyond these qualities, a state of pure *sattva,* to establish a relationship with transcendence and the divine in a state of selflessness, pure transparency, or super-consciousness, respectively.

Primordial nature: Translates the word *prakṛti,* referring to the original source of the physical world or the world of matter, from which the essential qualities arise. The word can mean more generally the original nature of something, and is also applied in some verses below to the divinity himself. The word in Sanskrit is of feminine gender, and the BG presents *prakṛti* as part of the divine feminine energy that complements the ultimate *puruṣa,* or the supreme masculine divinity, Krishna.

But one who,
with the mind
controlling the senses,
O Arjuna, engages in
The yoga of action
with the senses of action,
remaining unattached—
that person is superior. 7

Perform your prescribed actions,
for action is certainly better
than inaction.
And even the subsistence
of one's body cannot be
accomplished without action. 8

Other than action
that has sacrifice
as its purpose,
action is bondage
in this world.
Perform action
for this purpose,
O Kaunteya,
free from attachment. 9

Having previously sent forth
created beings
along with sacrifice,
the Lord of Created Beings said:
May you flourish
by this [sacrifice]!
Let this be the sacred cow
that fulfills your desires.[3] 10

---

3 The sacred cow that fulfills your desires: Translates *iṣṭa-kāmadhuk*. See the word *kāmadhuk*, "sacred cow," in verse 10.28.

With this [sacrifice] give
pleasure to the divinities;
may those divinities
please you.
By pleasing one another,
you shall attain
the greatest good.[4] 11

Indeed, the divinities,
satisfied by sacrifice,
will give you desired pleasures.
Without giving back to them,
one who enjoys these gifts
is only a thief. 12

Virtuous persons
who eat the remnants
of sacrifice are
freed from all faults,
Whereas wretched persons
only ingest suffering
when they cook
for their selfish motives. 13

4 Divinities: Translates the plural of *deva*. Divinities are not beings with eternal functions, as is the supreme Divinity. Rather, they are superior beings, functioning under the supreme Divinity, Krishna. They are beings who preside over the natural elements, divine only in the sense that they function on behalf of the divine.

From foodstuffs
beings come into being;
from rain
foodstuffs manifest;
From sacrifice
rain comes into being;
sacrifice arises
from action. 14

Understand that action arises
from Brahman, the Vedas;
this Brahman arises originally
from the Imperishable.
Therefore eternal Brahman,
which pervades everything,
is established in sacrifice.[5] 15

Thus the [sacrificial] cycle
has been set into motion;
one who does not
keep it turning in this world,
Whose life is impure,
who delights in the senses—
such a person lives in vain,
O Pārtha. 16

However, the human being
who delights
only in the self,
who is self-satisfied
And finds full contentment
in the self alone—
for that person
there is nothing to be enacted. 17

---

5 The Imperishable: Translates *akṣara,* which can also mean the sacred syllable "OM," the most prominent utterance in mantras.

Surely, such a person
has no [selfish] motives,
either in acting
or in not acting
in this world.
And nor has such a person,
in relation to all beings,
any need whatsoever
for [selfish] motives. 18

Therefore, without attachment,
perform action
that is to be enacted.
Indeed, by performing action
without attachment,
a person attains the Supreme. 19

For by action alone,
King Janaka and others
attained full perfection.
Even if only considering
the welfare of the world,
you are obliged to act.[6] 20

Whatever the greatest one does,
that very thing
other persons will do.
Whatever standard
the greatest one enacts,
that the world follows. 21

---

6 King Janaka: Known to have attained perfection by his actions as a king. He is the father of Sītā, the queen consort of the divine manifestation of Vishnu as Rāma.

For me, O Pārtha,
there is nothing
whatsoever to be enacted
in the three worlds,
Nor is there anything
not attained that is
to be attained—
even so, I engage in action. 22

Indeed, if ever I should not
engage in action untiringly,
Human beings everywhere
would follow my path, O Pārtha. 23

These worlds would perish
if I should not perform action,
And I would be the cause of chaos—
I would destroy these procreated beings. 24

As the ignorant act,
attached to action,
O Bhārata,
So the wise should act
without attachment,
desiring to act for
the welfare of the world. 25

One should not cause
confusion in the discernment
of those attached to action,
who are without knowledge.
One should leave them
to pursue all actions—
one who is thus wise,
performing all actions
while fully absorbed in yoga. 26

Actions are being carried out
in every instance
by the 'qualities'
of primordial nature.
The self, bewildered by
the notion of 'I am acting',
thinks, "the creator of action am I."[7] 27

However, O Mighty-Armed,
one who knows the truth
about the distribution
of the 'qualities'
and their actions,
Being mindful that
"the 'qualities'
are operating on
those very 'qualities' "—
that one is not attached.[8] 28

---

7 The creator of action: Translates *kartā*, which can mean "the doer," "the agent of action," or literally, "the one who acts." The word can also refer to cosmogenesis: "the creator of the universe." The sense here is that the soul depends upon much beyond itself, such as the workings of the essential qualities of nature, in order to act in the world, and ego-centeredness prevents the soul from knowing this, giving it a false sense of power.

8 Distribution of . . . actions: Refers to the types of social obligations in the *varṇas*.

Distribution of the essential qualities: As they are found in numerous permutations and combinations, and the ways they affect souls in determining their *varṇas*.

See BG 4.13, which also contains the phrase *guṇa-karma-vibhāgaśaḥ*.

Those deluded
by the 'qualities'
of primordial nature
are attached to the actions
of those 'qualities'.
One whose knowledge
is complete should not
disturb those who are dull,
whose knowledge is incomplete. 29

Renouncing all actions in me,
with one's thought on
the 'principle of self',
Without longings,
without a sense of 'mine'—
fight, with grief cast off.[9] 30

Those persons who
constantly follow
my teaching,
Who are full of faith
and envy no one,
also are freed from
[the effects of] action. 31

However, those who are
envious of my teaching,
who do not follow it,
Bewildered by all knowledge—
know them to be lost
and thoughtless. 32

---

9 Following BG 2.61, this is the next instance that introduces the ultimate message of the BG, with the words "renouncing all actions in me." These two verses anticipate the beginning of chapter 4, in which Krishna boldly declares his secret of divine love and his identity as the Divinity.

The 'principle of self': Translates *adhyātmā*, which is introduced more thoroughly beginning in BG 7.29.

One acts according
to one's own nature,
even a person of knowledge,
For beings
follow their nature—
what shall repression accomplish? 33

For any one of the senses,
upon the object of that sense,
both attraction and
aversion are placed.
One should not come
under the control
of either of these, for
indeed they block one's path. 34

Better is one's own dharma
even if imperfect
than another's dharma
followed perfectly.
Better is death in following
one's own dharma,
for another's dharma
brings danger.[10] 35

Arjuna said:

By what, then,
is a person compelled
to do wrong
Even against one's will,
O Vārshneya [Krishna],
as if driven by force? 36

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10 Better is one's own dharma . . . : The first half of this verse is repeated as the first half of BG 18.47.

Dharma: The word is used here more generally, carrying over the sense of "path" from the last word of the previous verse.

The Beloved Lord said:

It is selfish desire,
it is anger, arising from
the 'quality' of *rajas*.
All-consuming and
greatly calamitous,
know it to be
the enemy in this world. 37

As fire is covered by smoke
and a mirror by dust,
As an embryo is covered by a womb,
so this world is covered by this. 38

The knowledge of the knower
is obscured by
this constant enemy
In the form of selfish desire,
O Kaunteya,
a fire that indeed
is impossible to satisfy. 39

The senses, the mind,
and the faculty of
discernment
are said to be
the resting place
of this [enemy];
Through these
it bewilders
the embodied,
obscuring knowledge. 40